HEALTH

Colorectal Cancer: The Importance of Prevention and Early Detection

Colorectal cancer—cancer of the colon or rectum—is the second leading cause of cancer-related death in the United States. Colorectal cancer is the third most common cancer in men and women.

The risk for developing colorectal cancer increases with advancing age. Risk factors include inflammatory bowel disease, a personal or family history of colorectal cancer or colorectal polyps, and certain hereditary syndromes. Lack of regular physical activity also contributes to a person's risk for colon cancer, but does not affect rectal cancer risk. Other factors that may contribute to the risk for colorectal cancer include low fruit and vegetable intake, a low-fiber and high-fat diet, obesity, alcohol consumption, and tobacco use.

Prevention and Early Detection: Keys to Reducing Deaths

Reducing the number of deaths from colorectal cancer depends on detecting and removing precancerous colorectal polyps, as well as detecting and treating the cancer in its early stages.

Four tests are recommended for colorectal cancer screening.

- The **fecal occult blood test (FOBT)** detects blood that is not visible in a stool sample. One U.S. clinical trial reported a 33% reduction in colorectal cancer deaths and a 20% reduction in colorectal cancer incidence among people offered an annual FOBT.

- In **flexible sigmoidoscopy** exams, physicians use a hollow, lighted tube (sigmoidoscope) to visually inspect the interior walls of the rectum and part of the colon. Case-control studies found that deaths from colorectal cancers located within reach of the sigmoidoscope were 59% lower among people who had undergone a sigmoidoscopy than among those who had not had the procedure.

- In **colonoscopy** exams, physicians use a hollow, lighted tube (colonoscope) to visually inspect the interior walls of the rectum and the entire colon. During this procedure, samples of tissue or cells may be collected for closer examination or polyps may be removed.

- The **double-contrast barium enema** test comprises a series of X rays of the colon and rectum; the X rays are taken after the patient is given an enema containing barium dye followed by an injection of air.

Colonoscopies and barium enemas can be used as screening tests or as follow-up diagnostic tools when the results of another screening test are positive. Another procedure, called a **digital rectal examination**, involves a physician inserting a lubricated, gloved finger into the rectum to feel for abnormalities. This test inspects only a limited area and is not recommended as a screening method.

The State Health Plan PREVENTION PARTNERS
SOUTH CAROLINA BUDGET AND CONTROL BOARD
EMPLOYEE INSURANCE PROGRAM
APRIL 2004